EXCLUSIVE: How Reporting From Israel Changed My Worldview Forever

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In an exclusive article for HonestReporting, foreign journalist Hunter Stuart recounts how he was exposed to the realities of reporting from Israel and found that his pro-Palestinian views were dramatically changed as a result.

I've wanted to be a journalist for as long as I can remember. Journalism always seemed like such important work, challenging peoples' biases, bringing hard truths to the public in order to keep them honest and informed.

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Ever since I spent two weeks in Egypt as a teenager – this was in January 2001, less than a year before 9/11 – I've dreamt of being a freelance reporter in the Middle East. I was fascinated by terrorism, by the idea that someone believed in something so much they'd give their life for it. Every journalist wants to cover the big stories, and I thought the Middle East was the biggest story on Earth.

So I decided to go. In 2015, at age 32, my wife and I looked at a map of the Middle East and chose Jerusalem as our new home. Not only was the city Westernized and relatively safe, it was a stone's throw from the most publicized conflict in the world. That summer we quit our jobs in New York City and moved to Israel.

The public appetite for news from Israel-Palestine is almost bottomless, and it wasn't hard for me to find work after moving to Jerusalem. I quickly started selling stories to news outlets in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, as well as for Al Jazeera English, which is based in Qatar.

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It was immediately obvious to me that most of these organizations wanted news that would highlight the suffering of Palestinians and lay the blame on Israel for that suffering. As Matti Friedman, a former editor at the Associated Press's Jerusalem bureau, wrote in The Atlantic in 2014, the news media views "the Israel story" as a story of Jewish moral failure. Events that don't support that narrative are often ignored.

Matti Friedman

I was content to tell this story for my first few months in Israel, because I, too, believed it. As I wrote recently in The Jerusalem Report magazine, I had a deeply negative view of the Jewish state until I moved there. I grew up in a WASPy New England town where everyone is a liberal Democrat. For some reason, hostility towards Israel is a knee-jerk liberal opinion in the U.S. (and in much of Europe). As a product of my environment, I believed that Israel was a bully and the primary obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

But foreign affairs always look different when they become local, and nowhere is that more true than in Israel. I began to see that one sunny afternoon not long after I moved to Jerusalem. On that day, I went to cover a Palestinian protest at an Israeli-run prison near Ramallah. A reporter for The Independent and I drove out there and fell in with a group of about 100 Palestinian demonstrators as they marched towards the prison.

When they arrived, about a half dozen Israeli soldiers came out to meet them. The Palestinians quickly set up a roadblock of burning tires to prevent the Israelis from escaping. More and more protesters arrived – I don't know from where – but I soon saw them swarming over the hills above the prison, clad in face masks and keffiyehs. It was like a scene from Game of Thrones. Some had knives in their belts. Others had brought ingredients for Molotov cocktails. They took up positions on the hills above the prison and began using powerful slingshots to hurl rocks and chunks of concrete at the six or so Israeli soldiers down below. The Israelis were so outnumbered that I couldn't help but question the narrative that Israel was Goliath and the Palestinians were David, because here in front of me it looked like the exact opposite.

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Photojournalists document riots by Palestinian demonstrators in the Arab neighborhood of Silwan, eastern Jerusalem; part of a photo essay depicting what all mainstream media avoid to document: the presence of the photographer and his influence over the events. Photo by Ruben Salvadori / Flash 90

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When I visited the Gaza Strip a few months later, I again saw the difference between how journalists portray a place and reality. Reading about Gaza in the news, you'd think the whole place was rubble, that it looks more or less like Homs or Aleppo. In fact Gaza is no different in appearance from anywhere else in the Arab World. During eight days in the Strip, I didn't see a single war-damaged building until I specifically asked my fixer to show me one. In response, she drove me to Shujaya, a neighborhood of Gaza City that's a known Hamas stronghold and is still visibly damaged from the 2014 war.

Was the destruction in Shujaya shocking? Yes. But it was very localized, and not at all indicative of the rest of Gaza. The rest of Gaza is not so different from many developing countries: people are poor but they manage to provide for themselves, and even to dress well and be happy most of the time. Actually, there are parts of the Strip that are quite nice. I went out to eat at restaurants where the tables are made from marble and the waiters

wear vests and ties. I saw huge villas on the beach that wouldn't be out of place in Malibu, and – right across the street from those villas – I visited a new, $4 million mosque.

Do Gazans endure some incredible hardships? You bet. Are most of them living in destroyed buildings, open to the elements, as news outlets often portray them? Absolutely not. I don't begrudge them their marble tables or their beachside villas. Like anyone else, they want to be comfortable, to enjoy life. But I find it odd that once in awhile, foreign news organizations wouldn't see fit to run an article about Gaza's wealthy neighborhoods or million-dollar mosques. But no, they prefer to focus on the tiny minority of the Strip that is still damaged from the war with Israel in 2014 (a war that, by the way, Hamas started) because that is what confirms the narrative that Israel is a superpower brutalizing Arabs for its own selfish purposes and that is the narrative that too many people want to hear.

Hunter Stuart (Photo credit: Damon Dahlen/HuffPost)

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Nevermind the fact that freedom of the press in Gaza and elsewhere in the Arab World is virtually nonexistent. In many ways, trying to report from Gaza was an absurd and dangerous endeavor. During a single week in Gaza, I got in trouble on two separate occasions with Hamas for breaking their strict rules for the press. On the first occasion, my fixer and I were at the beach boardwalk in Gaza City, interviewing people about an

upcoming Gaza election (which was later canceled, not surprisingly, since most Arab leaders hate democracy). After about 15 minutes, a young fellow in a T-shirt and cargo pants approached us and had an unpleasant-sounding conversation in Arabic with my fixer, after which my fixer told me we had to leave immediately because the man was a Hamas intelligence officer and was displeased with us asking people political questions.

On the second occasion, my fixer and I were photographing destroyed buildings in Shujaya when two Hamas soldiers, neither of whom could have been a day older than 25, literally ran over to our car, took our IDs, confiscated my camera and escorted us to a military barracks where a group of Hamas officials questioned us extensively about who we were and what we were doing taking pictures there. They looked through every photo on my camera before they allowed us to leave. My fixer was visibly shaken. I couldn't blame her: Hamas often arrests, beats and sometimes even tortures journalists who say things that make them look bad.

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While living in Israel, I noticed that a lot of journalists seemed to think of themselves as advocates. They spoke of journalism as a way to give voice to the underdog, and for too many of them, Palestinians were the underdog. Good journalism, of course, does not advocate. It tells the truth, regardless of who looks good and who looks bad. Because the truth does not have feelings.

Considering this, it's perhaps not surprising that reporters in Israel and the Palestinian Territories tend to be close with the staffers of human rights agencies. They run in the same social circles, go out to eat and drink together. Perhaps that's why nearly every article on the internet about Israel contains a quote from the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or other such NGOs. As a reporter, it's easy to quote these groups because they provide all the information you need, in an accessible, easily comprehensible way.

I admire a lot of the work these NGOs do. The problem is that they often act in a way that's biased against Israel. Too often, they place the blame for Palestinian suffering on Israel, rather than, say, the callousness and corruption of Palestinian leaders, who clearly bear a large part of the blame for their people's pain. These groups each have their own agenda, but since their public-facing persona is appealing, since they cast themselves as the spokesmen for the oppressed, most liberals living in the U.S. and Europe take them at their word.

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Working as a reporter in Israel for a year-and-a-half didn't shatter my faith in journalism. But it increased my skepticism that it can do good in the world. Eight years of working for the news media has made me more and more alarmed by how partisan it's becoming. News publishers these days target millennials on social media who'd rather see their own opinions validated than see an article that's balanced and objective. These audiences don't want to have their biases challenged. If the media exists only to reaffirm what we already believe, we'll only become more divided, and there will only be more and more conflict in the world.

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Hunter Stuart is a journalist and writer with more than 8 years of professional experience, currently working as a Senior Editor at Dose Media in Chicago. He was a staff reporter and editor at The Huffington Post in New York from 2010-2015. Most recently, he spent 1.5 years working as a freelance reporter in the Middle East, where he wrote for Vice, The Jerusalem Post, Al Jazeera English, the International Business Times and others. His reporting has also appeared on CNN, Pacific Standard, the Daily Mail, Yahoo News, Slate, Talking Points Memo and The Atlantic Wire.

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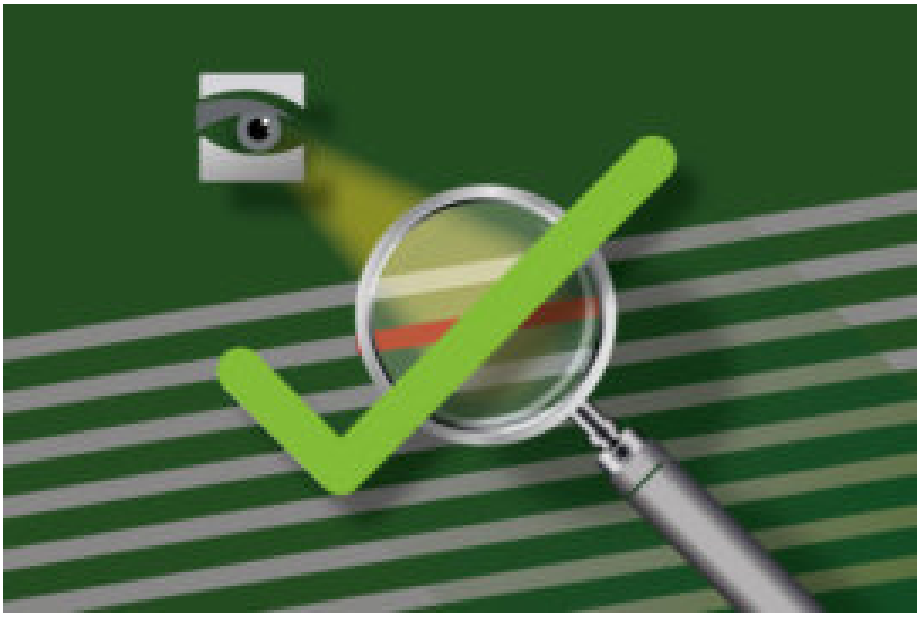

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